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What can Academic Development learn from the Health Humanities?

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Abstract

The Health Humanities is a movement that seeks to promote engagement with arts and humanities disciplines as a way of helping professionals, patients, informal carers and members of the public to understand healthcare more fully. In this paper I draw parallels between health and learning and suggest that a similar approach would be of value for academic developers working with colleagues and students. I indicate the potential scope for the Learning Arts and Humanities, and provide examples of existing practice, in which the methods and sensibilities of literary studies are shedding light on learning and teaching in Higher Education.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that there is more to being a doctor than technical competence and propositional knowledge, and that we need medical practitioners

“... who take charge of their own minds, who are free from narrow and unreflective forms of thought, who are compassionate and who act in the public or professional world.”(Cole et al., 2015:ix)

Although less often acknowledged, it strikes me that this description of individuals embodying autonomy, agency, reflectiveness and compassion in their practice, is equally appropriate to university teachers. These attributes cannot be developed through narrowly instrumental instruction and the straightforward transfer of information. In medicine, we have the well-established discipline of Medical Humanities to address the need for a broad and deep curriculum through exposure to and dialogue with the arts and humanities. More recently, the emerging field of the Health Humanities has tackled a wider remit, working with a range of health professionals, patients, carers and other members of the public and with a more ambitious aim than its predecessor:

“Rather than trying to humanise an existing biomedical knowledge base... the integrative approach attempts a more thoroughgoing process of refocusing medicine to address what makes us fully human.” (Crawford et al. 2010:5).

In this paper I suggest that we bring the spirit of the Health Humanities into our universities, to help us to humanise higher education. I propose that as academic developers we should look more often to the methods and sensibilities of the arts and humanities to shape and inform our work, particularly with university teachers but also with other participants in higher education: students, librarians, learning technologists, counsellors, study advisers, policymakers and others.

What is meant by the Health Humanities?

Health Humanities has been described as “a free-form and viral movement” that grew out of dissatisfaction with the Medical Humanities, following calls for broader, deeper, more inclusive and more applied approaches to health-related development and practice (Crawford et al. 2015: 19). At the heart of both are deep engagement with literature, philosophy, history, art, music and a range of other disciplines and practices. Rather than framing these as pleasurable distractions from the more serious concerns of science, they are valued as providing distinctive and essential ways of meaning making. The arts and humanities are prized for their ability to teach us to listen and to look attentively, to empathise with others’ experiences and perspectives and to give expression to our own. They can help us to live and work with ambiguity and paradox. Importantly, they can remind us to remain open to critical questioning of the assumptions on which our meaning making is based. What distinguishes the Health Humanities from the Medical Humanities is a commitment to radical change as well as democratisation, addressing the needs and contributions not only of medical practitioners and other health professionals, but of patients, carers, and all those whose voices are less often heard. I propose that we recognise and support a parallel movement in university learning and teaching. We could call it the Learning Arts and Humanities.

How are the Health Humanities relevant to academic development?

Learning, like health goes to the heart of what it means to be human. Higher Education, like healthcare is battered by economic and political storms. Like doctors, academics who teach are sometimes framed as technicians when we know that they are so much more than that.

Experiences of learning and teaching, like experiences of illness and doctoring can benefit from sources of insight and wisdom that are accessible only through the arts and humanities: for example images, narrative and metaphor; tolerance for ambiguity and complexity; multiple perspectives and subjectivities; the potential to go beyond language; the integration of cognition and affect. Like doctors, university teachers would do well to recognise the contributions of a range of colleagues, as well as reconsidering their partnership with students, as doctors must with their patients.

There are of course important differences between doctors and university teachers. Medicine has long-established training and development programmes, a well-defined body of knowledge and an ethical code, whereas Higher Education practitioners have to identify and meet their own professional development needs and navigate an unwieldy collection of literatures in the absence of agreed ethical guidelines. Doctors tend to identify strongly with their medical roles, whereas university teachers' identities may be weakened by competing priorities and a lack of prestige for teaching as opposed to research. Doctors, although hard-pressed, are expected to devote time to doctoring. The majority of academics who teach, even those for whom their teacher identity is strong, have to justify making space for teaching among other pressing priorities. For all of these reasons, university educators are unlikely to be able to participate in sustained programmes of study in the arts and humanities to help them make sense of their teaching. We will have to find ways of transforming our existing academic development activities so that they allow for access to these necessary forms of learning.

What could the Learning Arts and Humanities be?

My vision for the Learning Arts and Humanities is that academic developers would encourage both colleagues and students to examine learning and teaching at university through the diverse lenses of arts and humanities practices and knowledges. Using creative and artistic approaches, we could find fresh ways of asking and answering familiar questions: What is teaching? What does it mean to learn? We could open up debates about the place of university learning in society, examining ideas of inclusion and privilege and practices that promote empowerment for students, and reflectiveness for teachers and policy makers. On a more personal level, we could explore the lived experiences of learning and of teaching, cultivating self-awareness, criticality and compassion. We should of course acknowledge that educational researchers working in empirical and social sciences traditions already do many of these things: my point is that arts and humanities have a distinctive contribution to make.

In my own practice and research as an academic developer I turn to the methods and sensibilities of literary studies. For example I invite groups of students, academics and academic developers to engage deeply with poems and other writings as a starting point for reflection on learning and teaching. As they pay careful attention to a short text word by word, together they build up layers of meaning, often leading to surprising insights. (X, 2013)

I have co-facilitated workshops in which groups of early career academics meet to share written accounts of their experiences of teaching. Group members carefully read each account and turn it into a short poem, by removing words and adding a title. The author of the original account listens to each of the poems in turn. Participants report a lessening of isolation, a renewed vitality in their reflection and the ability to make connections with everyday practice (X and X 2017).

I have also used poetic inquiry as a way of investigating professional development for academics who teach(X X and X under review). By transcribing research interviews in the form of poems, it has been possible to bring into view some of the more nuanced, conflicted and contradictory elements of participants' experiences.

Where next?

If we could develop and intensify these moments of engagement with reading and writing literary texts, as a way of making meaning as teachers and learners, I believe these practices could help us to:

- reject narrowly instrumental approaches to professional development
- bring teachers and teaching into view, in contrast with misguided interpretations of student-centredness that tend to erase them from the picture

- welcome the contribution of other participants in Higher Education: students, learning technologists, counsellors, policy makers and others

and, perhaps most importantly,

- reintroduce beauty and joy into university teaching that has come to be perceived as bleak and unfulfilling

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